

27 Tishri, 5780

(October 26, 2019)

BERESHEET - “In the Beginning” - Genesis 1:1 – 6:8

Haphtarah: Isaiah 42:5 – 43:11

Apostolic: Romans 5:12-21

Commentary excerpts from:

Covenant and Conversation:
A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible
Genesis: The Book of Beginnings
by Rabbi Jonathon Sacks

TOPIC OUTLINE

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I. Intro to The Book of Genesis

A. Commentary by Rabbi Jonathon Sacks

Genesis, the book of *Beresheet*, is as its name suggests, about beginnings: the birth of the universe, the origins of humanity, and the first chapters in the story of the people that would be known as Israel or (after the Babylonian exile) the Jews. It tells of how this people began, first as an individual, Abraham, who heard a call to leave his land, birthplace and father's house and begin a journey, then as a family; it closes as the extended family stands on the threshold of becoming a nation. The journey turns out to be unexpectedly complicated and fraught with setbacks. In a sense, it continues till today. This is part of what makes Genesis so vivid. We can relate to its characters and its dilemmas. We are part of their world, as they are of ours. No other ancient literature has so contemporary a feel. This is our story; this is where we came from; this is our journey.

But this is not all Genesis is, and in reading it thus we risk missing its full significance. Maimonides makes the fundamental point that *Resheet does not mean "beginning"* in the sense of "first of a chronological sequence." For that, biblical Hebrew has other words. *Resheet* implies the most significant element, the part that stands for the whole, the foundation, the principle. Genesis is Judaism's foundational work, a philosophy of the human condition under the sovereignty of God...

...More than a narrative device, the element of suspense reflects a central theme of Genesis: God's gift of freedom to humanity. God created the universe; therefore God is free. By endowing human beings with his "image and likeness," He gave them freedom as well. We may be, like the first human, "dust of the earth," but there is within us the "breath of God." We are shaped by our environment, but we can also shape our environment as well. We are created, but also creative. To a degree shared by no other life form known to us, we can choose how to act and how to react. That is good news, but also bad, as we rapidly discover in the Torah's narrative. We can obey but also disobey; we can create harmony or discord. The freedom to do good comes hand-in-hand with the freedom to do evil...

...the Torah allows us to see ourselves as we really are, infinitesimal, fallible and frail, yet touched by the wings of infinity.

II. Moses, Beresheet and the People of the Exodus

A. Who is your Redeemer?

1. The Creator of the Universe
 - a. Let My people go... Exodus 7:16
2. The One True God
 - b. Demythologizing the gods of Canaan and Egypt
 - sun (shemesh) Genesis 1:16
 - moon (yareah) Genesis 1:16
 - sea (yam) Genesis 1:10
3. Thus says God the LORD... Isaiah 42:5-9

III. Let Us make man in Our image... Genesis 1:26-27

A. Early evidence for the Trinity?

1. Exegesis vs. Eisegesis
 - a. What was the intent of the author?
 - b. How would the original audience have understood the text?
2. Hebrew “bara” - He created (vs 27)
 - a. masculine singular form

B. The Essence of Man

– [Commentary by Rabbi Jonathon Sacks](#)

We are familiar with its statement that God created man “in His image, after His likeness.” Seldom do we pause to reflect on the paradox. If there is one thing emphasized time and again in the Torah, it is that God *has no image*. Hence the prohibition against making images of God. For God is beyond all representation, all categorization. “I will be what I will be,” He says to Moses when Moses asks Him His name. All images, forms, concepts and categories are attempts to delimit and define. God cannot be delimited or defined; the attempt to do so is a form of idolatry.

“Image,” then, must refer to something quite different than the possession of a specific form. The fundamental point of Genesis 1 is that God transcends nature. Therefore, He is free, unbounded by nature's laws. By creating human beings “in His image,” God gave us a similar freedom, thus creating the one being capable itself of being creative. The unprecedented account of God in the Torah’s opening chapter leads to an equally unprecedented view of the human person and the capacity for self-transformation. Everything else in creation is what it is, neither good nor evil, bound by nature and nature's laws. The human person alone has the possibility of self-transcendence. We may be a handful of dust but we have immortal longings...

... As Maimonides writes in his “Laws of Repentance,” if we had no freedom, if all we did was determined by forces beyond our control, what would be the point of

commanding people to do this, not that? Where would be the justice in rewarding obedience and punishing sin? Without freedom, the whole edifice of law and responsibility falls to the ground.

The Torah is a sustained exploration of human freedom, the greatest gift God gave man, as well as the most fateful, for freedom can be used or abused. It can lead to the highest heights or the lowest depths: to love or hate, compassion or cruelty, graciousness or violence. The entire drama of Torah flows from this point of departure. Judaism remains God's supreme call to humankind to freedom and creativity on the one hand, and on the other, to responsibility and restraint - becoming God's partner in the work of creation.

C. Three Stages of Creation

– [Commentary by Rabbi Jonathon Sacks](#)

One of the most striking propositions of the Torah is that we are called on, as God's image, to imitate God. “Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2):

The sages taught: “Just as God is called gracious, so you be gracious. Just as He is called merciful, so you be merciful. Just as He is called holy, so you be holy” So too the prophets described the Almighty by all the various attributes: long-suffering, abounding in kindness, righteous, upright, perfect, mighty and powerful and so on - to teach us that these qualities are good and right and that a human being should cultivate them, and thus imitate God as far as we can.

Implicit in the first chapter of Genesis is thus a momentous challenge: Just as God is creative, so you be creative. In making man, God endowed one creature — the only one thus far known to science - with the capacity not merely to adapt to his environment, but to adapt his environment to him; to shape the world; to be active, not merely passive, in relation to the influences and circumstances that surround him...

...God wants us to be part of the world, fighting its battles, tasting its joy, celebrating its splendor. But there is more.

In the course of my work, I have visited prisons and centers for young offenders. Many of the people I met there were potentially good. They, like you and me, had dreams, hopes, ambitions, aspirations. They did not want to become criminals. Their tragedy was that often they came from dysfunctional families in difficult conditions. No one took the time to care for them, support them, teach them how to negotiate the world, how to achieve what they wanted through hard work and persuasion rather than violence and lawbreaking. They lacked a basic self-respect, a sense of their own worth. No one ever told them that they were good.

To see that someone is good and to say so is a creative act — one of the great creative acts. There may be some few individuals who are inescapably evil, but they are

few. Within almost all of us is something positive and unique, but which is all too easily injured, and which only grows when exposed to the sunlight of someone else's recognition and praise. To see the good in others and let them see themselves in the mirror of our regard is to help someone grow to become the best they can be. "Greater," says the Talmud, "is one who causes others to do good than one who does good himself." To help others become what they can be is to give birth to creativity in someone else's soul. This is done not by criticism or negativity but by searching out the good in others, and helping them see it, recognize it, own it, and live it.

"And God saw that it was good" ~ this too is part of the work of creation, the subtlest and most beautiful of all. When we recognize the goodness in someone, we do more than create it, we help it to become creative. This is what God does for us, and what He calls us to do for others.

IV. It is not good for man to be alone... Genesis 2:18

A. The Genesis of Love

- [Commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks \(info@rabbisacks.org\)](mailto:info@rabbisacks.org)

In Genesis 1, God creates things – chemical elements, stars, planets, lifeforms, biological species. In Genesis 2-3, he creates people.

In the first chapter, He creates systems, in the second chapter He creates relationships. It is fundamental to the Torah's view of reality that these things belong to different worlds, distinct narratives, separate stories, alternative ways of seeing reality.

There are differences in tone as well. In the first, creation involves no effort on the part of God. He simply speaks. He says "Let there be," and there was.

In the second, He is actively engaged. When it comes to the creation of the first human, He does not merely say, "Let us make man in our image according to our likeness." He performs the creation Himself, like a sculptor fashioning an image out of clay: "Then the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."

In Genesis 1, God effortlessly summons the universe into being.

In Genesis 2, He becomes a gardener: "Now the Lord God planted a garden ..."

We wonder why on earth God, who has just created the entire universe, should become a gardener. The Torah gives us the answer, and it is very moving: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." God wanted to give man the dignity of work, of being a creator, not just a creation. And in case the man should consider such labor as undignified, God became a gardener Himself to show that this work too is divine, and in performing it, man becomes God's partner in the work of creation.

Then comes the extraordinarily poignant verse, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'" God feels for the existential isolation of the first man. There was no such moment in the previous chapter.

There, God simply creates. Here, God empathizes. He enters into the human mind. He feels what we feel. There is no such moment in any other ancient religious literature. What is radical about biblical monotheism is not just that there is only one God, not just that He is the source of all that exists, but that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. God knew the loneliness of the first man before the first man knew it of himself.

That is what the second creation account is telling us. Creation of things is relatively easy, creation of relationships is hard. Look at the tender concern God shows for the first human beings in Genesis 2-3. He wants man to have the dignity of work. He wants man to know that work itself is divine. He gives man the capacity to name the animals. He cares when he senses the onset of loneliness. He creates the first woman. He waits, in exasperation, as the first human couple commit the first sin. Finally, when the man gives his wife a proper name, recognizing for the first time that she is different from him and that she can do something he will never do, he clothes them both so that they will not go naked into the world. That is the God, not of creation, but of love.

That is what makes the dual account of the naming of the first woman so significant a parallel to the dual account of God's creation of the universe. We have to create relationship before we encounter the God of relationship. We have to make space for the otherness of the human other to be able to make space for the otherness of the divine Other. We have to give love before we can receive love.

In Genesis 1, God creates the universe. Nothing vaster can be imagined, and we keep discovering that the universe is bigger than we thought. In 2016, a study based on three-dimensional modeling of images produced by the Hubble space telescope concluded that there were between 10 and 20 times as many galaxies as astronomers had previously thought. There are more than a hundred stars for every grain of sand on earth.

And yet, almost in the same breath as it speaks of the panoply of creation, the Torah tells us that God took time to breathe the breath of life into the first human, give him dignified work, enter his loneliness, make him a wife, and robe them both with garments of light when the time came for them to leave Eden and make their way in the world.

The Torah is telling us something very powerful. Never think of people as things. Never think of people as types: they are individuals. Never be content with creating systems: care also about relationships.

I believe that relationships are where our humanity is born and grows, flowers and flourishes. It is by loving people that we learn to love God and feel the fullness of His love for us.

B. It is not good for man to be alone

1. "It is good" - Ki Tov
 - a. Appears 5 times in Genesis chapter 1 (vs 4, 10, 12, 18, 25)
 - b. "It is very good". Genesis 1:31
2. "it is not good" - Lo Tov (Genesis 2:18)
3. We are created for intimacy (physical, emotional, spiritual)

Lesson: We, all humanity, are created in the image of God.

To Love others is imitate God.

To Love others is to love God.

To love others is to "be Holy"

Let all that you do be done in love.
1 Corinthians 16:14

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